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# Semiotic Reading of Edgar Allan Poe's Poem "The Raven"

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"A word is dead when it's been said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day."

— Emily Dickinson

**ABSTRACT.** What do we mean by semiotics and what is the role of semiotics in communication? How can we apply semiotics in literary works? Is that really possible? When we are talking about sign system there are so many questions that rush to our mind which are unanswered, this is because of our infinitesimal knowledge on semiotics and sign system. We have so many authors showing the power of words in their works and they highlighted those words in their masterpieces. So words play a great role in communication and transformation of information and they believe that each word belongs to a system which we call it sign system. In general this paper attempts to show semiotics in general; how, why and when it came into existence and we will apply this approach on a poem called "the raven" by Edgar Allan Poe.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is theory of sign system and semiotic studies are increasingly attractive to whoever is interested in sign at large. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, philology, not linguistics, was the science of language and their approach to language study was diachronic but by the passage of time this view toward language has been changed and linguistics came into existence and its practitioners are Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Pierce.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913) was the first semiotician whom he believed that " A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable ,it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology I shall call it semiology (from the Greek semion : sign) " (course in general linguistics , p16) and his approach to language study was synchronic, he believes that each word belongs to a sign system which made up of two parts signifier which is written or spoken mark and signified which is a concept ,for example; when we hear the sound tree , the sound is signifier and the concept of the tree that comes to our mind is signified, so the signifier joins with signified to form a sign. He believes that each word is used arbitrarily by agreement.

But what about semiotics? it was used by American philosopher and pragmatist Charles Sanders Pierce (1839 - 1914) , it includes a large branch of science which works on anthropology , philosophy , literature , nature and so many things and the model which he proposed for language system consists of three parts : index , icon , and symbol.

*An icon is a sign in which the signifier physically resembles the signified, for example; a painting is an icon to the extent that the picture resembles the subject it represents. An index is a sign in which the signifier has a concrete, casual relationship to the signified, for example; smoke signifies fire, a knock on the door signifies that someone is on the door. A symbol is a sign in which the relationship between signifier and signified is neither natural nor necessary but arbitrary, that is decided on by the conventions of a community or by the agreement of some group. (Tyson: 218)*

Semiotics is interested in literary conventions, rules, literary devices and formal elements, it is not only a sign system but also deals with feelings, it includes objects, gestures, activities, sounds, images, in short anything that perceived by the sense (Tyson:216). In this paper we are going to show how words in poetry play this role and how one word could be symbol and we are going to reveal the deep layers of the poem "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe.

Edgar Allan Poe was an American author, poet, editor, literary critic and he was considered as a part of American Romantic Movement. He was an outstanding figure for creating the horror atmosphere, so he was best known for his tales of mystery and the macabre. He was the first well-known American writer trying to earn a living through writing alone, resulting in a financially difficult life and career. He was born in Boston in 1809. He hardly knew his parents, whom were both actors; his father left the family when Edgar was a child, and his mother died before he reached the age of three. John Allan and his wife Frances took the young boy into their home and brought him up as their own child. Between 1815 and 1820 he lived in Scotland and England, where he did well in his studies at a private school near London. Returning to America, he went to study languages at the University of Virginia in 1826. He was an excellent student, but John Allan never sent him enough money to live on. Poe turned to play cards for money to help him buy the books and clothes he needed, but lost so much of what he earned, so this failure forced him to leave the university after a few months.

Poe was determined to become a professional writer, against John Allan's wishes, and the two quarreled. He left home and went to Boston, where he joined the army. In 1829 he left the army and joined his aunt, Maria Clemm, and her daughter, Virginia. John Allan died in 1834; leaving nothing to the person he had treated as a son.

*As an American writer and critic who is credited with refining the short story form and inventing the modern detective story, Poe has been denied the full respect due his accomplishments. The details of his life, rife with reports of gambling, drinking, addiction to opiates, and other profligate behavior, combined with his marriage to a 13-year-old cousin, have overshadowed his achievements, which include the publication of more than 350 poems, short stories, and critical reviews and essays, and his influence in creating a uniquely American form of literature, as well as his continuing influence on contemporary literature and culture. (Dawn: 3)*

He is not only one of the greatest poets of 20<sup>th</sup> century but also one of the most mysterious poets in the world; his works are often strange, wild and highly imaginative. Many of them examine an extremely detailed way the dark side of human existence. In his time, he was a very original writer. He was fascinated by thoughts of horror and death and his stories communicate a world of terror that comes straight from the depths of his own troubled mind.

In one word many of his works are based on experiences of fear and sadness in his own unfortunate life which craved in his mind thus he was often filled with romantic ideas. In addition to what we said the frightening, gloomy, and dark words which he had chosen shows his inner conflicts whom he had in his youth.

One of the poems which bring him fame was "The Raven". Edgar worked on the poem; writing and rewriting line by line, through the warm summer month and autumn of 1844, it was the most perfectly planned and written poem ever created, Edgar examined each word, phrase, but never satisfied, always changing, improving, rewriting.

*The poem made Poe a celebrity during his first nine months living in New York City. To take advantage of the poem's recognition and his own newfound fame, Poe also published *THE RAVEN AND OTHER POEMS* in 1845. Poe enhanced his fame and aroused discussion of the poem by publishing "The PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION" in 1846, in which he purports to give an account of how he wrote the poem, from the selection of his theme to the choice of meter and refrain, thus giving further weight to those critics who have viewed Poe as a conscious—rather*

than solely creative—artist. He claimed to have pondered the poem for years and so was able to write the final draft late in 1844 in one sitting. In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe writes, “I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or metre of the ‘Raven.’ . . . [T]he latter is octameter acatalectic alternating with heptameter catalectic and terminating with tetrameter catalectic.” Poe asserted “what originality the ‘Raven’ has, is in their [the lines’] combination into stanza; nothing even remotely approaching this combination has ever been attempted.” (Down: vii)

“The Raven” tells a story of a grieving lover visited “upon a midnight dreary” by the ill-omened raven, which the lover in his solitude labels “Prophet! . . . thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!” The emotional nature of the exchange between the raven and the melancholy speaker develops and changes in the course of the poem, as the speaker is, at first, seemingly amused by the raven’s precocity, then angered, and finally driven to despair. While the reader might be drawn by the seeming evil qualities of the bird and its remarkable propensity for appropriately responding “Nevermore” to the speaker’s queries, Poe’s description of the dramatic action of the poem, revealed in “THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION,” is simple: “A raven, having learned by rote the single word ‘Nevermore,’ and having escaped from the custody of its owner, is driven at midnight, through the violence of a storm, to seek admission at a window from which a light still gleams—the chamber-window of a student, occupied half in poring over a volume, half in dreaming of a beloved mistress deceased.” The narrator’s grief is in his “sorrow for the lost Lenore” as he glorifies her “whom the angels name Lenore.” As the torment of the speaker in the poem increases, he asks for “respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore” and asks to “forget this lost Lenore.” Her status as “a sainted maiden” and “a rare and radiant maiden” remains intact throughout the poem, and near the end of the poem the speaker states twice that she is the maiden “whom the angels name Lenore.” Some critics have taken Lenore to represent the loss of the love of Poe’s young life to marriage, not death. Others have interpreted the name as a symbol of the creative impulse that is rare, precious, and too easily lost. (Down: 156)

As you see the poem opens with the narration “once upon” so it prepares us for the fact that we are going to hear a story but sad story, this narration helps for development of the poem. The poem is often noted for its musicality (using so many alliteration and internal rhyme) this helps the reader to fancy a picture in mind, as Poe explains it in “The Philosophy of Composition,” this repetition is chosen as a plausible vehicle for the repetition of the refrain—the word “nevermore”.

The bird is thus a figure for mechanical poetic repetition. The purveyor of the burden has to be a bird: the intentional relation to a signified is denied through the nonhuman repetition of a pure signifier. The word “nevermore,” offered here as the most poetical of words, in fact crops up uncannily as a distinguishing poetic mark, the words that the poet used helps the reader to feel the atmosphere of sadness and fear. So if the word “nevermore” stands in Poe as a figure for poetic language as such, a number of theoretical implications can be drawn. Since the bird is not human, the word is proffered as a pure signifier, empty of human intentionality, a pure poetic cliché. The empty repetition of the word therefore dramatizes the theoretical priority of the signifier over the signified which Poe claimed when he said that he began the text of the poem with the letters o and r. The plot of “The Raven” can be read as the story of what happens when the signifier encounters a reader. For the narrator of the poem first introduces himself as a reader, not a lover—a reader of “quaint and curious forgotten lore.” Poe’s claim, in “The Philosophy of Composition,” that the poem was written backwards (commencing

*with its effect) applies both to the poem and to the essay about it: both are depictions not of the writing but of the reading of "The Raven." (Bloom: 23)*

The poem's status as mechanical repetition is signified in another way as well. It would be hard to find a poem which is packed with more clichés than "The Raven": ember, remember, December, midnight, darkness, marble busts—all the bric-a-brac of poetic language is set out in jangling, alliterative trochees to hammer out a kind of our-background of the gothic encounter. And the conversation begins in pure politeness: "Tell me what thy lordly name is," asks the speaker of the bird, and the bird says, "Nevermore." The poem within the poem—the single word "nevermore"—has at this point finally been spoken and the reader sets out to interpret it. He begins by finding it obscure:

*Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,*

*Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore.*

Then he tries a little biographical criticism:

*"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store*

*Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster*

*Followed fast and followed faster....*

Sinking onto a velvet couch, the reader then turns to free association "linking fancy unto fancy"—until the air grows denser and the reader sees the bird as a messenger of forgetfulness (psychoanalytic criticism), to which the Raven's "nevermore" comes as a contradiction. It is at this point that the reader begins to ask questions to which the expected "nevermore" comes as a ferociously desired and feared answer. The reader cannot leave the signifier alone. Reader-response criticism has set in. In this way, he writes his own story around the signifier, letting it seal the letter of his fate until, finally, it utterly incorporates him:

And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor

Shall be lifted—nevermore.

Sense has been made through the absorption of the subject by the signifier. The poem has sealed, without healing, the trauma of loss. What began as a signifier empty of subjectivity has become a container for the whole of the reader's soul. Poetry of the pure signifier is just as impossible to maintain as poetry of the pure signified. Repetition engenders its own compulsion to- sense. Poetry works because the signifier cannot remain empty—because, not in spite, of the mechanical nature of its artifice. (Rosenheim: 46)

So we can say that this word is fundamentally used to show loss, so each word plays a great role in the poem, in addition each word belongs to sign system that helps the reader to receive information from the poem and get familiar with the poet's attitudes. As we mentioned before the field of semiotics is enormous, ranging from the study of the communicative behavior of animals (zoo semiotics) to the analysis of such signifying system as human bodily communication (kinesics and proxemics), olfactory signs (the code of scents), aesthetic theory and rhetoric. (Terence Hawkes 997:124), so in this poem the poet uses zoo semiotics, by the help of symbolism which was both philosophy and technique in America during 19<sup>th</sup> century, for convey their ideology, individual experience and philosophical tenants, using of a bird such as raven he wants to transfer darkness, gloominess, sadness, loneliness, grief, death, nostalgia, so this bird has so many connotations, also it could be symbol of sorrowful and never ending remembrance. It also reflected the lost love and loss of hope. We also have a color symbolism, two colors that they are exactly opposed each other, bright colors which belongs to Lenore and dark colors which belongs to the speaker of the poem,

and to his sadness. Not only darkness belongs to the speaker but also the chamber in which the narrator is placed, it is used to show the loneliness and sadness of the man. In this poem the chamber plays a role of coffin to show death and horror, chamber is play as an index for us, so it shows the death of someone whom she is Lenore and internal death of the narrator of the poem itself. The story takes place in midnight and December which both of them symbolizes the end of happiness in the life of the narrator; December is a month of unfruitfulness, death, coldness, which symbolizes end of something and end of something new to happen. Also we can say that he is searching for something to alleviate his sorrows, so he uses Nepenthe, as a symbol, an ancient drug used to help one to relieve sorrows. The ravens' shadow in the last stanza that covers the narrator depicts that he won't feel happiness in his life again. The shadow remains on the floor and its narrator's soul that will never climb out under the shadow of sadness. The door and the window in this poem symbolizes for passage from this world to the next and passage from reality to dream world.

## 2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, semiotic is the study the life of signs. The job of words is to communicate and in this communication there should be transformation of information. When we start to read a literary work, the work creat a picture in our mind so with the help of these pictures we communicate with the work of art, so we can say that the literary products spoke with us and transfer the writers attitudes. This transformation of information belongs to sign system which we call it semiotics, so semiotic is an instrument which uses symbols, pictures, objects and language which alludes to scientific study of a work of art, for example; in this work, the poem was written not to excite, but to exist in planes of melancholy and Poe's fairly lofty tone that must be taken at face value. The poem populated with images that are clearly situated beyond any simple notion of a pleasure principle and the poet transfers this idea via supernatural and Gothic elements that highlighted in the poem. He uses Gothic elements in his works which shows ruin, decay, death, terror and chaos. The raven is signified for the picture that came to our mind as a signifier, it could be symbol of loneliness, death, hopelessness, so the poem transfers visual iconic message to the reader. He creates his masterpiece by the use of Gothic elements by stating unconscious that pictures modern man's distress in search for value and identity. Totally we can say that Poe is writing a highly artificial poem that describes the signifier as an artifice that somehow captures the genuine.

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